



open wide our hearts

the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

Racism and Migration in the United States

In the November 2018 pastoral letter against racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the Catholic bishops of the United States urge all Catholics to acknowledge “the scourge of racism” that still exists in our hearts, words, actions and institutions. Racism is rooted in a failure to acknowledge the human dignity of people of different ethnic backgrounds. It does not reflect the love of neighbor that the Lord calls us to have. It denies the beauty of the diversity of God’s plan. Racism manifests itself in sinful individual actions, which contribute to structures of sin that perpetuate division and inequality. One area where racism has become evident is in the way that the United States has approached the issue of migration, historically and even today.



Ethnicity has long been a factor guiding migration policy in the United States. One of the earliest and most overt examples of this was the forced migration and enslavement of millions of African people to colonial North America. Slavery, and the racist ideas the slave trade was

built upon, informed the development of migration policy. Another example was the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, a federal law that effectively barred Chinese migration to the United States.

In the early twentieth century, eugenics became popular among many of the political and scientific elite. Though false, it was upheld as science wherein biological principles were used to differentiate between what were perceived as superior and inferior races. Opponents of mass immigration believed that non-Catholic Northern European or Anglo-Saxon bloodlines were superior to those who originated outside of northern Europe. Policies enacted based on eugenics responded to fears that unrestricted migration from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, or Africa, would “dilute” the Anglo-Saxon nature of life in the United States.

This same ideology reached a high point with the passage of the National Origins Act in 1924, which imposed a quota system that significantly restricted immigration from countries in the Eastern hemisphere into the United States. Western hemisphere countries were exempt. This system remained in place for four decades, ending with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Although the overt racial discrimination that was built into the quota system was eliminated, many migrant communities continue to experience racism in life in the United States. Hispanics and other migrant populations are often

discriminated against in hiring, housing, educational opportunities, and in the criminal justice system.

Though the Gospel calls us to welcome the stranger, many immigrants and refugees are met with fear, judgement and hatred. Racist rhetoric that marginalizes and causes discrimination against migrant populations is common. In response, the church must provide a counter-example for those who use race to deny the God-given dignity of people who are migrants. As Catholics, we are called to welcome newcomers upon their arrival and help to ease their transitions into life here in the United States. A truly welcoming community does not emerge by chance but is established through the hard work and conviction of local residents, through direct

service, sharing experiences, faith, advocacy, and institution building.

In their pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the bishops of the United States and Mexico emphasized the importance of encounter in the process of conversion. *Strangers No Longer* reminds us that “part of the process of conversion of mind and heart deals with confronting attitudes of cultural superiority, indifference, and racism; accepting migrants not as foreboding aliens, terrorists, or economic threats, but rather as persons with dignity and rights, revealing the presence of Christ; and recognizing migrants as bearers of deep cultural values and rich faith traditions.”

For More Information

- [Justice for Immigrants Campaign](#)
- [USCCB Committee on Migration and Refugee Services](#)
- [Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope](#), Pastoral Letter of the U.S. and Mexican Bishops
- [USCCB Committee on Cultural Diversity](#)

Pray with St. John Paul II

“Lord God, our Father, you created the human being, man and woman, in your image and likeness, and you willed the diversity of peoples within the unity of the human family. At times, however, the equality of your sons and daughters has not been acknowledged, and Christians have been guilty of attitudes of rejection and exclusion, consenting to acts of discrimination on the basis of racial and ethnic difference. Forgive us and grant us the grace to heal the wounds still present in your community on account of sin, so that we will all feel ourselves to be your sons and daughters.” ([Universal Prayer on Day of Pardon](#))

